



MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 31, 2015
TO: Members of the Association of Art Museum Directors
FROM: Task Force on Archaeological Material and Ancient Art
SUBJECT: Definition of “In Antiquity”

I. Introduction.

In 2013, the AAMD Guidelines for the Acquisition of Archaeological Material and Ancient Art were amended in a number of respects, including adding definitions for archaeological material and ancient art, as set forth below:

- A. “Archaeological material” means an object of cultural significance created in antiquity and discovered on land, below ground or under water as a result of scientific or clandestine excavation, exploration or digging activities or inadvertently as a result of other activities.
- B. “Ancient art” means a work of art created in antiquity that is not archaeological material.

The definitions were intended to clarify what had been a focus of the Guidelines from their inception in 2004 – addressing the problem of looting of antiquities, i.e., works of art and cultural objects made in antiquity. The Guidelines were never intended to address all forms of looting, theft and destruction, but rather those that were viewed as the most widespread and significant, the looting of sites of the ancient cultures of the world.

The 2013 Guidelines purposely left to each museum the determination of what “in antiquity” means. Because the Guidelines recommend the development of acquisition policies consistent with the Guidelines, the Guidelines contemplated that museums in the course of amending their acquisition policies to comply with the 2013 Guidelines would develop, based on

their curatorial expertise and areas of collecting, definitions for “in antiquity.” In that process, a number of AAMD members asked for guidance in developing those definitions. As a result, the Task Force on Archaeological Material and Ancient Art was asked to develop guidance for museums looking to define “in antiquity.” To assist the Task Force, eight museums that collect either very broadly or in specific areas that were perceived as difficult of definition were asked to consider, for a number of different cultures, what would be a dividing line between antiquity and a more modern era, or as suggested by a number of the museums for a number of cultures, the difference between ancient and medieval times.

In order to assist this process, a number of cultures were identified for consideration, specifically:

- Greek and Roman Art;
- Egyptian Art;
- Chinese Art;
- Japanese Art;
- Korean Art;
- Indian (South Asian) Art;
- Southeast Asian Art;
- Ancient Near Eastern Art; and
- Art of the Americas.

Set forth below is the synthesis by the Task Force of the thoughts of the museums that responded to the request to consider what “in antiquity” means as to each of the above cultures.

Please note that the Task Force has provided guidance, but not definitions, for members through this memorandum. The determination of specific dates is intended to be based on scholarship, curatorial expertise and peer considerations and is independent of legal definitions, both under the laws of the United States (or other country of domicile of the

member) and those of relevant foreign countries, that may have relevance to the acquisition decision.

II. Greek and Roman Art.

Most responding museums identified a specific historic event that represented the end of antiquity and beginning of the medieval period. While one of the responding museums suggested that the emblematic event was the Edict of Milan, 313 CE, the majority of the museums responding used a later event, the Sack of Rome in 476 CE, as emblematic of this shift from the ancient to the medieval. Another museum argued that no specific event represented the shift, but rather the fall of the western empire in general. That museum argued for a simple dividing line along the time line representing the erosion of the western empire as a simpler method of classification and used 500 CE.

III. Egyptian Art.

Two museums used the same defining event they had identified for Greek and Roman cultures as the appropriate dividing line for Egypt, the Edict of Milan, 313 CE, and the Sack of Rome, 476 CE, respectively. Another museum focused on events in Egypt alone and saw the end of Roman rule of ancient Egypt, 330 CE, as the appropriate demarcation. Another museum argued for 400 CE, noting that this is considered the beginning of “modern” Egyptian history. Yet another approach was to look to the end of the Roman Empire and the establishment of a new Byzantine empire under Justinian, 527 CE. Three museums identified the Muslim conquest of Egypt, 641 AD, as the introduction of a new, modern, era, although even that date can be more particularized. For example, one museum suggesting the Muslim conquest broke that process down on a regional basis, using for Nubia/Sudan the date of 821, the Egyptian invasion of Sudan.

IV. Chinese Art.

The earliest date noted by two museums, 221 BCE, is the beginning of the first unified empire under the Qin Dynasty. Three museums considered the end of the Han Dynasty, 220 CE, as demonstrating the change from ancient to a medieval period. Two museums looked to the Tang Dynasty as the defining point, but one thought that the beginning of that Dynasty, 618 CE, was the appropriate date, whereas the other argued for the end of the Tang Dynasty.

V. Japanese Art.

Most (five of the seven museums responding) identified the beginning of the Nara period as the change from an ancient to a more modern period, although within that designation, two of the museums looked to the beginning of that period, 701 CE, and three chose 710 CE, the establishment of the capital at Nara. One museum argued for an earlier date, 645 CE, with the passage of the Taiho reforms and the promulgation of a central authority and legal system. Finally, one museum argued for 1185 CE, which represents the majority of periodization systems that begin the medieval Chusei era.

VI. Korean Art.

Most of the responding museums focused on the unification of the Korean Peninsula under a single rule as the period that defines the end of antiquity. Within this concept, there were varying views on exactly when that period should be identified, with two museums looking to the beginning of the Silla period, 668 CE, two looking to the full unification of Korea and the expulsion of the Tang Dynasty, 676 CE, and one the complete reunification of Korea under the leadership of the new state of Goryeo, 918 CE.

VII. Indian (South Asian) Art.

Most of the responding museums looked to the Gupta period as the dividing line between antiquity and a medieval period. Three considered the dividing line to be the beginning

of that period, 320 CE. Another three considered the transition between the ancient and medieval periods to be closer to or at the end of the Gupta period. Within that time frame, 500 CE (two museums), a date by which the Gupta period was already faltering, or late 6th century were suggested dates. Another museum looked to the Muslim 12th century invasions of India as a major turning point, ending what some have characterized as an ancient period.

VIII. Southeast Asian Art.

While a number (three) of museums looked to the beginning of the Angkorian period (800 CE or 802 CE), one museum looked to an earlier date, 500 CE, and the beginnings of historical records of artistic production in the region. Yet another museum also looked to the Khmer empire as the dividing line, but identified the end of that empire, 1462 CE, as the transition from a more ancient culture. Another museum looked to the definition of the post-Classical era, the end of the 12th century CE, while yet another museum broke down the applicable periods regionally identifying Cambodia with the beginning of the Khmer empire, 802 CE, Vietnam with unification under the Ly Dynasty, 1009 CE, Laos with the beginning of the Lan Xang Kingdom, 1353 CE, and Thailand with the beginning of the Chakri Dynasty, 782 CE.

IX. Ancient Near Eastern Art.

With one exception (a museum that suggested the same date as advanced for the Greek and Roman period, *i.e.*, the Edict of Milan, 313 CE), the responding museums all focused on the advent of Islam, although within that broad designation, specific dates did vary. The earliest suggested date was 622 CE (three museums), being the date that Muhammad and his followers left Mecca for Medina. Subsequent dates suggested were 644 CE (one museum), the end of the Sasanian era and the beginning of the Arab invasions, 651 CE (two museums) as the real advent of Islam and 700 CE (one museum) as a more conservative date.

X. Art of the Americas.

Every museum saw the conquest of the Americas by Europeans as the end of the period that could be defined as “in antiquity”, but the museums differed as to an actual date. Four museums thought that the beginning of the Conquest period, 1492 CE, was the appropriate date, while others looked to substantial control of the relevant area by the Europeans as the end of the ancient period or, perhaps more precisely, the beginning of the Colonial period. Of these, two chose 1550 CE as a time when substantial European control had been achieved and another suggested 1532 CE.

XI. Conclusion.

The Task Force recommends that each member institution reviews the definitions above and either selects a date or date ranges accordingly and codifies them as part of its collections management policy, or chooses alternate dates and codifies those, with accompanying explanations. In so doing, each AAMD member institution will be in a position to explain the complexities of collecting in these various fields of ancient art, clarify their stance with regard to each cultural inheritance, and be in a position to make informed choices about future acquisitions.